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TAGS: ASEC PGOV PREL KPKO SOCI AU UNSC SU
SUBJECT: SUDANESE GOVERNMENT BREAKS FROM HOSTILE STANCE TOWARDS NGOS
IN APRIL 30 MEETING

REF: A) KHARTOUM 577
B) KHARTOUM 555
C) KHARTOUM 554

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On April 30, Sudanese Presidential Advisor Dr. Ghazi Salahudin convened a rare meeting between international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and senior Government of National Unity (GNU) officials to raise mutual concerns and identify ways to strengthen coordination between the government and NGOs. During the meeting, government officials took a conciliatory tone towards the NGOs, noting the government's appreciation of the organizations' work. Dr. Salahudin also made several references to the government's discussions and negotiations with U.S. Special Envoy J. Scott Gratiot. Dr. Salahudin expressed the government's willingness to comply with the framework negotiated between the National Congress Party and the Special Envoy in early April, as well as ensure its implementation at all levels of the government. The Presidential Advisor indicated that he had personally held discussions with all relevant high-level government officials to explain the framework and invited NGOs to share any potential issues with him. Notably, Dr. Salahudin also announced that three of the expelled NGOs would be replaced and stated that he did not understand why the 2007 Joint Communique could not be applicable to all of Sudan. (Embassy Khartoum suggests that latter of these proposals would be worth pursuing during the Special Envoy's next visit to Sudan, and as an item for further UN follow-up.) While the meeting represented a significant step in establishing a positive relationship between the Sudanese Office of the President and NGOs, it is unclear whether this meeting will translate into immediate tangible improvements in the day-to-day operations of NGOs working in northern Sudan. END SUMMARY.

A New Approach

¶2. (SBU) The April 30 meeting between the government and NGOs was

hosted by Sudanese Presidential Advisor Dr. Ghazi Salahudin, Minister of Humanitarian Affairs Dr. Haroun Lual Ruun (SPLM), and the Director of GNU Humanitarian Aid Commission's (HAC) NGO Section Ahmed Adam. (Note: Visibly absent from the meeting was GNU HAC Commissioner-General Hassabo Mohammed Abdel Rahman, who is reportedly out of the country and has not been present at several recent high-level meetings concerning the implementation of the Special Envoy's framework. Post notes that the notorious Hassabo's absence from the meeting potentially represents a positive step in improving coordination between NGOs and the government and fostering a more positive tone towards NGOs in the media. End Note.) Unlike previous meetings with Hassabo, NGOs reported that the media was not present, which created a more favorable and open atmosphere for discussion.

Statement by Minister Dr. Ruun

¶3. (U) Throughout the meeting, the three government officials stressed the importance of mutual cooperation between the government and NGOs and took a more conciliatory tone towards NGOs, noting the government's appreciation of the organizations' work. While indirectly alluding to the government's previous stance -- "some NGOs were involved in certain things that created this situation" -- Dr. Ruun noted that many NGOs are willingly cooperating with the government and conducting life-saving work, and stated that the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs (MOHA) had undertaken significant measures to help facilitate the work of NGOs. During his statement, Dr. Ruun clarified that only a small group of NGOs were involved in behavior deemed unacceptable by the government and that NGOs should not fear a broadening of this generalization to include all NGOs.

¶4. (SBU) Dr. Ruun noted that the Presidential Advisor's presence at KHARTOUM 00000589 002.2 OF 004

the meeting confirmed the government's commitment to the Sudanese people not only at the MOHA-level, but also at the highest levels of the government. (Note: While the government's true commitment to implement the Special Envoy's framework and to facilitate humanitarian operations in Sudan remains unclear, Dr. Salahudin's presence marks the first high-level meeting with NGOs in at least two years. This meeting is a very positive sign of the government's willingness to follow through on the Special Envoy's framework. End Note.) Dr. Ruun expressed the government's readiness to "join hands" with any international or national NGO wishing to work in Sudan without a hidden agenda.

¶5. (U) Regarding the current situation in Darfur, Dr. Ruun stated that "things are moving" and noted that he had observed progress during his recent trip to Darfur. (Note: Dr. Ruun has conducted three visits to Darfur since the early March NGO expulsions, particularly to explain and enforce the April 16 ministerial decree in the Darfur states. End Note.) Dr. Ruun closed his statement by re-iterating his thanks to NGOs for their contributions, as well as re-emphasized the government's commitment to facilitate the work of NGOs.

Statement by Presidential Advisor Dr. Salahudin

¶6. (SBU) Dr. Salahudin began by stating that the meeting provided an essential forum for the government to listen to NGOs and explore ways that the two groups could work together. Although noting that he had relatively little prior knowledge of NGO operations, Dr. Salahudin stated that he had recently witnessed some NGO program implementation and was appreciative of NGOs' work. Salahudin noted that prior to the expulsions, he was not aware that NGOs actually distributed the aid that the organizations brought into the country.

¶7. (U) Dr. Salahudin made several references to the government's discussions and negotiations with the Special Envoy, as well as implementation of the Special Envoy's framework. Dr. Salahudin noted that the government and the Special Envoy had made an

agreement which "reinforces some existing commitments but also new ways forward," indicating that the Special Envoy had already raised many of the NGOs' concerns in meetings with the government. Since the negotiations in early April, Dr. Salahudin reported that he has been in contact with the two MOHA ministers to monitor progress on the agreement and explain procedural changes to other ministries. Dr. Salahudin indicated that he had personally held discussions with all relevant high-level officials to clarify the framework and ensure its full implementation. Dr. Salahudin further noted that GNU Minister of State for Humanitarian Affairs Ahmed Haroun is personally overseeing progress on implementation of the framework, particularly in the three Darfur states.

¶ 18. (U) Dr. Salahudin expressed optimism regarding the possibility for peace in Darfur, noting that the Special Envoy had made some progress in brokering a peace deal in Doha and expressing hope that the Government of Chad and armed opposition groups could reach a ceasefire agreement in the coming days. However, the Presidential Advisor indicated that peace is currently a "possibility, not a probability." Dr. Salahudin noted that once the peace process stabilizes Darfur, "handouts to IDPs could be stopped and real recovery/development work could begin." While noting problems with forced returns, Dr. Salahudin indicated that the government's goal is to end IDP's dependency on aid and encourage IDP returns.

¶ 19. (U) Dr. Salahudin highlighted that improving the operating environment requires a two-way commitment on the part of both the government and NGOs. Dr. Salahudin urged NGOs to explain the humanitarian situation without creating harm, noting that "activists" opposed to the government could exploit NGO reports that inadvertently portray the situation negatively. However, Dr. Salahudin also noted that some high-level officials in the government and "unruly elements of the media" had negatively depicted NGOs, creating impediments to NGO operations. Dr. Salahudin reiterated that both groups need to improve communications

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and cooperation to improve the operating environment.

¶ 10. (U) Prior to inviting the NGOs to ask questions, Dr. Salahudin re-asserted the government's commitment to previous agreements and highlighted the government's more active approach to ensuring implementation of these commitments. While noting that the government's ultimate objective is the return of all IDPs, Dr. Salahudin stated that even in such a case, NGOs could continue working on reconstruction in Sudan.

¶ 11. (SBU) NGOs, including Medecines Sans Frontieres (MSF) and members of the NGO forum, welcomed the opportunity for the meeting as well as the issuance of the April 16 decree and reiterated the organizations' commitment to conduct operations based on humanitarian principles for as long as needs exist in Sudan. In response to concerns regarding the Sudanization of aid, Dr. Salahudin reaffirmed that while the government is fully committed to nationalizing aid, this process is not meant to negate or undermine the work of international NGOs. He stated that both the government and NGOs need to reconcile the other side's demands to work toward an appropriate solution. In response to questions regarding the recent abduction of two Aide Medicale Internationale staff, Dr. Salahudin noted that the incidents were as embarrassing and painful to the government as to the NGOs. Dr. Salahudin elaborated that "it is not good for us as a government to feel helpless and ineffectual." The Presidential Advisor noted that the abductors should be tried and punished and indicated that the government would look into a role in protecting humanitarian workers. (Note: The two international NGO staff who were abducted have since been released and have returned to their respective countries - septel. End note.)

¶ 12. (SBU) While acknowledging the importance of the MOHA visits to Darfur to clarify the April 16 decree, NGOs noted that state officials are not fully implementing the decree. NGOs emphasized that communicating the decree at all levels of the government is necessary to ensure its full implementation. Dr. Salahudin agreed, noting that the decree will take time to fully implement in the Darfur states due to significant distances and difficulties in

communication. In addition, Dr. Salahudin noted serious concerns with difficult junior-level officers who use "self importance" and unilateral decisions to obstruct facilitation of the government's commitments. Prior to concluding the meeting, Dr. Salahudin stated that three of the expelled NGOs would be replaced and questioned why the Joint Communique could not be applicable to all of Sudan, as discussed during the Special Envoy's negotiations.

¶13. (U) In his closing remarks, Dr. Salahudin thanked the NGOs for their candor, stating that it was "good to hear such comments without glossing over the issues." Dr. Salahudin invited NGOs to discuss issues, even those regarding NGO staff intimidation, directly with him in the future.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) The April 30 meeting constitutes a significant departure from previous poisonous interaction between the government and NGOs, both in rhetoric and in tone. In a change from the previous two years, government officials openly expressed appreciation for the role of NGOs in providing assistance and expressed willingness to cooperate with the organizations to improve the operating environment in Darfur. While the meeting was a welcome development, it still remains unclear whether this "charm offensive" will lead to actual, palpable improvements in humanitarian operations on the ground. There have been some positive signs, such as the ministerial decree and Dr. Salahudin's meeting with the NGOs, but real improvements in the operating environment will only be observed over time. There is a ministerial level meeting of the reconstituted Higher Level Committee in Khartoum May 7, which Special Envoy Gration and UN U/S John Holmes will attend, at which donors and NGOs will be able to discuss adherence to the 2007 Joint Communique, an agreement the GOS spent much of the past two years undermining, in greater detail.

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